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SUBJECT: REMAINS FROM JEWISH CEMETERY TO BE RELOCATED

Summary

1. (SBU) Charge visited Gomel April 22 to view the site of a former Jewish cemetery which has been excavated as part of a construction project and has received extensive coverage in the international media. In a step which post believes does not conform with traditional religious requirements, the local authorities -- with the tacit approval of the Jewish community -- are removing all of the remains and have identified a different Jewish cemetery at which the remains will be reinterred. End summary.

Soviet Stadium on Site Being Replaced

2. (SBU) Charge was met at the cemetery site by Gomel Deputy Mayor Sergey Poroshin, Deputy Chairperson of Gomel Executive Committee, Head of the Secular Jewish Community Oleg Krasniy, and Chairman of the Jewish Religious Community Yosef Zholudev. Poroshin explained that human remains and gravestones had been discovered during the reconstruction of a stadium which had opened in 1961 and been recently demolished. According to him, Gomel authorities did not know about the fact that there used to be a cemetery, and only determined that after the first bones were unearthed. The Deputy Mayor vehemently denied media reports that dogs were carrying off bones and that remains were being discarded by construction workers.

3. (SBU) The representatives of the Jewish community present also said that nobody knew about the cemetery as it was probably destroyed during numerous occupations in two World Wars; it was noted to Charge that there was no evidence that anyone was buried at the cemetery less than 80 years ago. (Comment: This explanation is somewhat plausible. It is likely that most of the damage to the cemetery occurred during the Soviet era or during the Nazi occupation when the vast majority of Gomel's 50,000 estimated Jews were murdered. End comment.)

4. (SBU) Two youth volunteers from the Jewish community were working to collect remains during Charge's visit. In addition to human remains, two gravestones have been located, and are to be "returned" to the Jewish community; one was shown to Charge. Local police are guarding the site, which is not open to the public.

Second Cemetery Chosen for Reburial

5. (SBU) In response to Charge's question, Zholudev disavowed direct responsibility for holding the reinternment ceremony, and said that he has invited foreign rabbis to come and take care of the ceremony instead. The remains are to be reburied at the "Yuzhnoye" Jewish cemetery just outside Gomel.

6. (SBU) Taken to the "Yuzhnoye" cemetery, Charge was introduced to

a group of about 20 American university students mostly from New York, who have volunteered their spring breaks to help with various Jewish community projects in the Gomel area and were busy cleaning and restoring graves at that cemetery.

Comment

17. (SBU) At a time of great anti-U.S. hostility in Belarus, the hospitality of Gomel's Deputy Mayor (the municipality has faxed a letter to the Embassy saying that the Charge's visit would be "inexpedient") and his interaction with the Jewish community on this sensitive issue was pleasantly surprising. It is clear that Gomel recognizes the initial mishandling of the remains -- perhaps a bit exaggerated in the press -- impacts upon the city's reputation. (Admittedly, the Deputy Mayor demurred on the question of a commemorative plaque on the stadium, saying that it would "distress" attendees to sporting events in the new facility.) However, given the general expectation that Jewish cemeteries should be preserved intact, we are curious to see if any rabbi would choose to facilitate reinterment of the remains at a second site.

MOORE

CLOUD